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AMERICAN AUTHORS OF TODAY

IV. THE VOICE OF CHICAGO: EDGAR LEE
MASTERS AND CARL SANDBURG

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Edgar Lee Masters was born in Kansas in 1869, the birth year of Moody and Robinson. In early childhood he came to Illinois. As a student at Knox College he became keenly interested in the classics, but under parental pressure he entered the law, in which he has had a successful career. People who exclaim at the fact of a lawyer's suddenly becoming the most read poet in America do not know that Mr. Masters wrote poetry from boyhood, and that the forgotten volumes produced before the *Spoon River Anthology* of 1915 were as many in number as the rapidly appearing succession which since that year have contributed to his celebrity today.

His publications have been as follows: *A Book of Verses*, 1898; *Maximilian*, poetic drama, 1902; *The New Star Chambers and Other Essays*, 1904; *Blood of the Prophets*, 1905; *Allhea*, a play, 1907; *The Trifler*, a play, 1908; *Spoon River Anthology*, 1915; *Songs and Satires*, 1916; *The Great Valley*, 1916; *Toward the Gulf*, 1918; *Starved Rock*, 1919; *Domesday Book*, 1920; *Mitch Miller*, a boy's story, 1920; *The Open Sea*, 1921; *Children of the Market Place*, a novel, 1922.

The most important critical articles are Joyce Kilmer, in the *Bookman*, November, 1916; Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, pp. 137-232; Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry*, pp. 161-88; W. H. Wright, in *The Forum*, January, 1916.

Carl Sandburg was born in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1878. During boyhood he came to know the working world through his varied jobs in unskilled labor. He served in the war with Spain in 1898, then went to Lombard College in his home town for three years, and again had a miscellany of jobs, though now as a head worker. Since 1914 he has been on the staff of the *Chicago Daily News*. Like Mr. Masters, Mr. Sandburg felt his way toward poetry long before he gained a hearing. In 1914, ten years after the publication of his first booklet, his *Chicago* with a group of other poems won the \$200 Levinson prize offered by *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*; and in 1916 *Chicago Poems* appeared.

His publications have been as follows: *Chicago Poems*, 1916; *Cornhuskers*, 1918; *Smoke and Steel*, 1920; *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*, 1922; *Rootabaga Stories*, for children, 1922.

The most important critical articles are: Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, pp. 137-232; P. Rosenfeld, in the *Bookman*, July, 1921; Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry*, pp. 95-111.

I

With the years just following the World's Fair of 1893, Chicago

Gigantic, wilful, young,

With restless violent hands and casual tongue

became vocal in a new way. The city had never been voiceless, though up to these years the rest of the country had heard little from it but the shouts from the wheat pit and the uproar of the Haymarket Riots. Long after Far West and Gulf and Tidewater and Southern Mountain regions had been heard from in poetry and fiction, Chicago had not told a story, written a song, or painted a picture. The school child—who is averagely unschooled in contemporary literature—required to make a list of Illinois authors, searches out the imported Eugene Field, adds Lincoln, if reminded that the great president wrote great prose, and stops at that.

The Columbian Exposition supplied an immense new impulse. Theodore Thomas and the orchestra, Daniel French and the art museum, William R. Harper and the university, furnished rallying-points and attracted the support of local millions. Young authors, artists, sculptors, came to town and were patronized, not always for their own good, by the same wealth that undermined individuals even while it was beneficently establishing institutions. Certain college students in the East, rebellious at the domination of the Victorians, and the passing generation of New Englanders, decided to "put Chicago on the map." Stone and Kimball started publishing. *The Chap Book* was founded. *The Dial* continued on its modest way. Orchestra, art museum, and university flourished, Moody and Masters came to town—and still the local Miltons were mute and inglorious. Yet something real had happened. It was in those days that literary Chicago was born, and when it became of age—in about 1914—Mr. Masters' voice had changed, and he

and Carl Sandburg and Sherwood Anderson and Floyd Dell and Ben Hecht began to speak so loud and clear that all the country has had to listen.

II

Mr. Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) in the first years after publication was altogether the most read and most talked of volume of poetry that had ever been written in America. Coming out in instalments over a long period in a distinguished but obscure weekly, William Marion Reedy's *Mirror*, the collected poems are said to have been offered to several publishers before their final acceptance. Their circulation was rapid from the first. People who really knew poetry were interested and amused at their combination of a very old Greek form with the doings of an Illinois town. People who were allured but disappointed by the glitter and the hollowness of much of the new poetry were refreshed by the grim substance of this book. People who had never read poetry before took up the volume because they heard it had "punch." Villagers read it to protest as later they were to protest at *Winesburg, Ohio*, and at *Main Street*. And the literary throng was swelled, of course, as all literary throngs always are, by the novelty hunters, and the "shocker" hunters, and the tasters who want at least a spoonful of what everybody is reading.

Out of all the chorus of comment that greeted it there were two most insistent notes—the same two that greeted *Leaves of Grass* sixty years earlier—that it was "queer," and that it was morbid. There was reason for both charges. The *Anthology* was without doubt different from most modern verse, though its novelty lay in its return to an old and accepted Greek form. It was also without doubt disturbing to the sensitive, for it acknowledged and expatiated on the presence of hypocrisy, hate, greed, and lust in village life. Some of the objectors denied that any such conditions existed, or at any rate that they were typical; others fell back on the contention that even if the poems were based on fact they had no place in art, or even in print. What almost everyone failed to see was that in Mr. Masters' mind, while these conditions needed acknowledgment, they were not the most important elements in the life of Spoon River; for he acknowledged also the presence of

love, loyalty, spiritual strength, in the average town. And the people whom he admired and whom he massed toward the end of the collection, although not successful in material ways, were happy conquerors of circumstance.

It would be futile, however, to dodge or deny the fact that Mr Masters dwells long, not only on love, but on passion and lust in *Spoon River* and in other volumes; and that he pays more attention to the latter than many a seasoned and unprudish reader finds to his taste. But Mr. Masters' treatment of sex should not be regarded as unique. It is part of the history of contemporary literature. In a clearer perspective than we can command the future historian will be able to show the change from the treatment of love between man and woman as something inspired by a stimulus from without to the present-day discussion of the same thing as springing from an impulse from within. It was the old fashion to present Launcelot and Guinevere as adorable persons and then to set them adoring at sight. It is the new mode to present them as smoldering and highly inflammable and to set them aflame at meeting. It was the old romantic assumption that neither could have loved any but the other. It is the modern view that either might have fallen in love with any equally eligible object of desire. "This," says the modern realist, "is a disturbing thought only because it is a disturbing fact. If you don't like it, bring an indictment against life and not against art. Read Freud, Jung, Ellen Key, Havelock Ellis, and stop protesting at poetry, fiction, and drama. Sociology, philosophy, psychology, literature—they are all dealing with the same thing. As a matter of fact literature is nothing if not an index to the thought of the times."

If the protester can marshal his powers enough to reply that, even if this be true, he still wishes literature would not indicate so steadily the unhappy and desperate aspects of love, the realist rejoins, "But there is nothing new in this attitude of art, except in the explicitness with which the subject is handled. Literature seldom deals with happiness; but regularly with the quest for it or the loss of it. How much placid happiness is there in the great love stories of the ages? Antigone? Penelope? Helen? Dido? Griselda? Guinevere? Francesca? Juliet? Why did the fairy

tale always *end* with, 'And so they lived happily ever after'? Because uneventful happiness has no story to tell!" This is so evident, if one stops to think of it, that it does not even present an issue. It is a plain statement of fact.

The problem is a complicated and bewildering one—like life itself—better fitted for discussion in a whole volume than in a few casual paragraphs. An ample treatment of it should include a dozen contributory, interweaving factors: the entrance into social consciousness of biological knowledge, the changing place of religion and the church, the woman's movement and the challenge to the old theory of the home, the discrediting of self-denial and the enthronement of self-expression, the allied theories of eugenics and birth control, the influence of the world-war—time and some future philosopher-historian will unravel the tangle. But in the meanwhile Mr. Masters is contributing to it by what he writes on the intimate matters of sex. Given the frankness of Whitman, the analytical gifts of Browning, and the bias of Freud, Mr. Masters was bound to write some of the passages that have startled some of his readers. The issue—if there be an issue—is not as to whether these passages are true to life, but partly as to whether the dark and devious ways of love have not been overstressed, and partly as to whether they are good substance for pure literature. The reader of Masters' "Victor Rafolski" or "The Widow La Rue" or Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* or Hergesheimer's *Cytherea* or the run of many other novels and poems, is less likely to be disturbed by the joy of elevated thoughts than by the rousing of elevated pulse. Literature, like social philosophy, is becoming physiological and glands are regulating personality on every printed page.

There is no use in protesting on ethical grounds that such stories ought not to be written. They will be written as long as people are thinking the things that are in them; but it is quite pertinent to ask whether the problems involved in such stories are not better adapted to an intellectual treatment in the essay than they are to an emotional one in poetry or fiction. For many of us Bernard Shaw proves that they are by the superiority of most of his prefaces to most of his plays; and it is enough for us to say of such narrative

literature what Emerson once said of the communion service, that the end of our opposition is that we are not interested in it; that we are content that it shall go on to the end of time if it please God and please man. We may solve for ourselves the immediate problem as to whether it ought to be read by not reading it—if we can afford not to. And we shall do well to avoid the responsibility of setting up a general censorship.

III

However, neither the informality of style nor the grimness of subject-matter that characterized *Spoon River* are the overwhelming features of Mr. Masters' poetry as a whole. Mr. Reedy, the editor of the *Mirror*, actually persuaded him to give over an earlier conventional manner for the writing of his epitaphs. Some of the most applauded verses in *Songs and Satires* (1916) were reprinted from a volume of 1898 which was never put into general circulation. In the finished form of *Helen of Troy* and *When under the Icy Eaves* Mr. Masters was minding his poetical *p*'s and *q*'s; a practice to which he returns in every later volume. And as far as subject-matter goes, of the thoughts that catch and hold his imagination there is none more insistent than the one that sets him again and again to inquiring into the mystery of things, and to trying—little as the careless reader would suspect it—to satisfy himself with Matthew Arnold's formula, that "order and the will of God prevail." Life, he says up and down his writings, is an almost inextricable confusion. In the experience of the individual and of the group, influences and motives and actions are in continual conflict. It is hard to tell strength from weakness, honesty from duplicity, the ennobling from the debasing. But there are such traits as strength and honesty and nobility, and there is an all-embracing design in human life. This is the theme of "The Loom" in brief, and at length it is the theme of *Domesday Book*, the closest contemporary parallel of Browning's manifold story of Pompilia and Caponsacchi.

It is not the point of *Domesday Book* to show the directness of God's ways so much as to demonstrate the complex deviousness of man's. Shortly after the close of the world-war a young woman is found dead by a river side near an Illinois town. In this town an

educated man of independent means, impressed by the tragic waste-fulness of life as most people live it, has succeeded in becoming coroner, because of the chance it will give him to inquire into the unpublished facts of people's tragedies, and perhaps to find out the cause of the waste and to arrive at principles by which it can be avoided. He traces this girl's entire career in all its relationships, and in the search follows the ripples which her actions have started until they reach individuals who seem insulated from her by time and space and every social barrier. Out of the social chaos this inquirer seeks order. In the single case before him he finds, of course, no general solution. He is neither successful nor defeated so far; but in the very fact of continued search his belief in the possibility of finding is made evident.

In this there is something of the old Greek tradition which saw man beset by his own character, but there is quite as much of the modern point of view which sees man beset by society. Spoon River, while just as broadly human as Mr. Robinson's Tilbury or Mr. Frost's grim countryside, is much more definitely touched by the tide of events. The generations there are still deeply affected by the memories of the Civil War; they remember Lincoln and Altgeld; they are conscious of Bryan and Roosevelt; they are involved in politics and in church and bank scandals; they buy and sell with each other, and have daily jobs. Mr. Masters' Chicago is an equally definite place with named streets and buildings, and offices in them where the dark doings of high finance and low politics are planned. It is a city from which the troops went forth to France full of heroic optimism, and to which some of them returned with hopes sadly shaken. Yet Chicago is a symbol, too. Seated at the foot of the Great Lakes and beside *The Great Valley* of the Mississippi, with an outlet *Toward the Gulf* and *The Open Sea* beyond, it presents a picture of a present full of sordidness and squalor, but it fronts a future and in the future a fine hope.

IV

I remember vividly the mixture of disgust and contempt with which an official in an old eastern public library handed me a copy of Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* just after its publication in 1916.

He resented having to include it in the American Poetry section. When I read the opening line: "Hog Butcher for the World," I understood his feeling, and I also felt fairly certain that I had then read all that he ever had read or ever would read in the book. His manner made me feel guiltily responsible for the brutal city and the brutal line. Yet the objections raised by conservatives to the brutality of Mr. Sandburg's poems are quite as open to challenge as the strictures on the cynical pessimism of Edgar Lee Masters. The opening poem on Chicago is a glorification of muscular power honestly used.

Here is a tall, bold slugger set vividly against the little soft cities. It is no more than an elaboration of the lines from William Vaughn Moody quoted at the first of the chapter. His address "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter" is the challenge to a common man who is capable of vulgar talk himself though he resents vulgar treatment of sacred themes. So he sneers, "Where do you get that stuff? . . . Go ahead and bust all the chairs you want to." Poetry has always shaken the lance at shams and charlatans. The objection is not to the poetic material, then, but to the poetic manner which chooses to treat of a brute subject in language that the subject might use of himself or of another like him. The issue is on the old question as to the rival claims of elegant language and of common diction in literature; the question that Dante and Chaucer and Wordsworth and Whitman all settled in favor of the simpler colloquial forms. When Mr. Sandburg writes of "The Sins of Kalamazoo" he assails the town in the choice language of "a loafer lagging along"; and when he arraigns the political thievery of the gangsters he does it by letting a political thief say without shame,

Notnin' ever sticks to my fingers, nah, nah, nothin' like that,
But there ain't no law we got to wear mittens—huh—is there?
Mittens, that's a good one—mittens!
There oughta be a law everybody wear mittens.

However, this is not the only diction that Mr. Sandburg uses. The second entry in *Chicago Poems* begins,

The shadows of the ships
Rock on the crest
In the low blue lustre
Of the soft inrolling tide.

Words are as naturally fitted to subject as they are in the vulgar but poetically suggestive phrasing of the vulgar subject of grafting. And the third poem in the same volume ends with,

And then one day I got a true look at the Poor, millions of the Poor, patient and toiling; more patient than crags, tides and stars; innumerable, patient as the darkness of night—and all broken, humble ruins of nations.

It is a passage pervaded with the dignity of high respect for the sufferings of the oppressed. It is obvious that the poet does not sing one tune alone or in only one key; that he is simply speaking in character as any novelist or dramatist makes his characters do. He merely pays his readers the compliment of leaving out quotation marks.

Perhaps only those who have heard Carl Sandburg's voice in conversation, in ballad singing, and in the reading of his own poems, can quite respond to his artistry, for it is a voice of melodious rhythms, full of depth and tenderness, quite free from vehemence, simply used without a touch of "elocution," but with a complete command of tone effects, and the nicest possible feeling for the value of the retard and the half-pause. It is a voice for quiet ironies rather than for noisy invectives, and pre-eminently for the expression of sympathies rather than antipathies.

V

In the changing world of which Carl Sandburg finds himself a part and which he knows from the bottom up, he is aware, of course, of social injustice, and he makes his protest against it; but as one of the people himself he is not overwhelmed by the thought of social oppression, because he is upheld by the confidence that the future has better things in store:

When I, the People, learn to remember, when I, the People, use the lessons of yesterday and no longer forget who robbed me last year, who played me for a fool—then there will be no speaker in all the world say the name: "The People," with any fleck of a sneer in his voice or any far-off smile of derision.

It is the pathos rather than the tragedy of the mob that moves him. It is pathetic that toilers toil all day and all year with no prospect

but toil and dirt and poverty; that the city takes the fresh gold of life poured into it and turns it to dross; that the fish-crier, and the little shopkeeper, and the immigrant laborer on a picnic with his family, with so little to rejoice in, still ascend the hills of happiness. But it is pathetic, too, that wealth in its temporary pride builds corporations and palaces and mausoleums and fences to fend off the poor, and persists in forgetting that at the end are cool tombs, and that nothing can fend off death and the rain and tomorrow.

When he escapes from the town he finds reassurance in the broader expanses of time and space:

O prairie mother, I am one of your boys. . . .
I speak of new cities and new people,
I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.
I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down,
 a sun dropped in the west,
I tell you there is nothing in the world,
 only an ocean of tomorrows;
 a sky of tomorrows.

The prairie nourishes the living and houses the dead, symbol of eternity. Across it lie the railroads, slender ribbons of steel connecting the transitory towns. Yet the careless take the towns more seriously than the great stretch between and the reaches of time beyond all living towns.

I am riding on a limited express, one of the crack trains of the nation.
Hurling across the prairie into blue haze and dark air go fifteen all-steel coaches holding a thousand people.
(All the coaches shall be scrap and rust and all the men and women laughing in the diners and sleepers shall pass to ashes.)
I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he answers: "Omaha."

So as a poet he lives in the midst of the great spaces, but as a poet, too, he lives in the presence of beauty, and he finds it on every side—in the manifold moods of earth and sky and sea, in the innocence of childhood, in honest love and honest labor, in homely ways and homely places.

So it goes; there are accomplished facts.
Ride, ride, ride on the great new blimps—
Cross unheard-of oceans, circle the planet.
When you come back we may sit by five hollyhocks.
We might listen to boys fighting for marbles.
The grasshopper will look good to us.
So it goes. . . .

Carl Sandburg treats life frankly because on the whole he likes it and believes in it. Men who dodge the issue of describing things as they are are usually afraid to face the facts; but to him life with all its ugliness is touched with beauty and filled with solemnity. So in his own fresh way he sings the song of the people and of the days to come.

With Masters and Sandburg Chicago's tongue has ceased to be "casual."